

Becoming a person through other people

Parashat Miketz (Genesis 41:1-44:17)

by Rabbi Amy Bernstein
The Jewish Journal – December 29, 2016

Many scholars have suggested that the entire Torah is an answer to the question asked by Cain at the beginning of the book of Genesis: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” If we read the Torah in light of this, we would conclude that, until this *parsha*, the answer has been a resounding “no.”

This week, in Parashat Miketz, we read of one brother finally taking responsibility for the well being of another. It is an often-overlooked statement made by Judah when he asks Jacob for permission to take Benjamin to Egypt. As part of Joseph’s ploy to discover the real character of his brothers since their betrayal of him, he demands that they bring Benjamin, the only other son of Rachel, with them if they return from Canaan. Once supplies run out and it becomes clear the brothers must return to Egypt for more grain, they tell Jacob that Benjamin must accompany them on orders of Pharaoh’s second in command.

Understandably, Jacob balks. He tells them that if anything happens to Benjamin, as it did to his beloved Joseph, it will kill him. In one of the greatest and underappreciated moments in Torah, Judah steps forward and says, “*Anochi e’erveno miyadi tevaksheno*,” meaning, “I am bound up with him, I replace him, I am the collateral” (Genesis 43:9).

Whenever there was trouble in our class at the Hebrew Academy of Atlanta, we knew better than to claim our innocence by blaming those at fault because our teachers would invariably quote from our tradition, “*kol Yisrael arivin zeh*

bazeh,” which means, “every member of the people Israel is bound up one with the other.” It meant that we couldn’t get out of trouble because we didn’t do it. We were all in trouble because we were responsible for each other — our fates were intertwined and we were expected to behave as if we understood this and took it seriously.

The letters of the word “arivin” are the same as in Judah’s choice of “e’erveno.” This idea is very close to the African concept of Ubuntu. According to historian Michael Onyebuchi Eze, Ubuntu means, “A person is a person through other people. It is a demand for a creative inter-subjective formation in which the other becomes a mirror for my subjectivity. I am because we are.” Put more simply, the I that I am is an I (a self) because we are inextricably tied up with one another.

This is the profound lesson Judah has learned. He and Joseph have both experienced great pain and loss. Joseph’s losses are familiar to us — his being sold by his brothers, his being thrown in prison by Potiphar and having been forgotten by the butler to languish in prison for so many more years. Judah’s losses are less familiar to many readers — he loses two sons and in attempting to save his third son he betrays his daughter-in-law, Tamar. When Tamar acts to right the wrongs done her by Judah, he condemns her to death. It is Tamar’s choice to send evidence that would implicate and embarrass Judah that make him realize that he has been wrong and that she is the righteous one. His grief and his humbling at the hands of Tamar have changed Judah — he is now able to stand before his father and display empathy for Jacob’s fear of losing a second son. I believe this is one reading of the word “e’erveno” — he realizes, as in the worldview of Ubuntu, that he is who he is because of others and understands that their humanity is bound up in each other.

Life brings inevitable pain and loss. We wrong each other and suffer the terrible separation from people we love. Nowhere is that more vividly described than in the Joseph narrative. What this moment of Genesis teaches us is that we can choose how we are changed by life events and what our response is to the tragedies of living. Both Judah and later, Joseph, choose to understand their profound interconnection with others as a result of the devastating events they have experienced. It is not our first response, to be sure, and in some cases we will never achieve this perspective.

At this season of Chanukah, however, we are called to believe in the extremely unlikely, even the miraculous. We are asked to light only one small flame every night in the overwhelming darkness. Just lighting one small light each night results in a menorah, a thing that brings light and dispels much darkness. May we each look to our own grief and hurt that we might find a way to choose just one small way to hold it so that it shines empathy and compassion into a corner of our lives black with loneliness and hurt. If we can do this often enough this season, we may be able, like Judah, to know that we are responsible for one another because we find our very humanity through each other.

I would amend the words of my beloved Hebrew Academy teachers as follows; “*Kol ha’olam arivin zeh bazeh*” (“all the world is bound up one with the other”). Only when we reach this understanding in our families and communities we will be able to realize it as a world community. With the tragic images and news coming out of Aleppo recently, we know that there is no time to waste in our getting to Ubuntu, in achieving the willingness to say “*Anochi e’erveno*,” I am inextricably entangled with every other you and this is how I define my very humanity.

Rabbi Amy Bernstein is senior rabbi at Kehillat Israel Reconstructionist Congregation of Pacific Palisades.